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Bhutan's Policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH): A Multidimensional Experiment Defying One-Sided Interpretations

Katsu Masaki[†] and Jit Tshering[†2]

Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) is often dismissed by its critics as being an instrument for the country's elites to tighten their grasp on the monarchy-led, Buddhism-based state. This article problematizes this line of criticism by examining three chapters of the book *Development Challenges in Bhutan*. This book was chosen because it effectively serves the purpose as a one-of-a-kind compilation of critical essays on the country's policies for priority areas such as democratization, economic development, and cultural conservation. The three authors depict the social context in which GNH is implemented as being "authoritarian," "nationalistic," and "religiopolitical" in nature and claim that individual liberty and equity concerns are compromised in the name of protecting the country's established traditions. By drawing upon the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), this article illustrates the authors' disregard for the multiplicity of realities existing outside of the social context that, they allege, dominates Bhutanese society. The interactions and connections formed across Bhutan and other societies must be carefully observed to obtain a more realistic perspective of GNH as a multifaceted experiment that addresses thorny issues such as the global rise of post-democracy, free market ideology, and cultural politics of "good governance."

Keywords: Gross National Happiness, Actor-Network Theory, social context, macro-micro divide, multiplicity of reality

1. Introduction

Bhutan's policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) has garnered international praise for being a "multidimensional development approach that seeks to achieve a harmonious balance between material well-being and the spiritual, emotional, and cultural needs of our society" (Gross National Happiness Commission n.d.). On the other hand, GNH has also been criticized by scholars who believe that it distorts reality to uphold the standpoints of the country's elites while suppressing the voices of the common people (e.g., Munro 2016; O'Neil 2018; Pellegrini and Tasciotti 2014).

Those engaged in this line of criticism propose to understand GNH in its broader political context (O'Neil 2018). GNH has been instrumental in depriving the general populace, especially minority groups, of the right to assert their own social, cultural, and political identities (Pellegrini and Tasciotti 2014). GNH is a tool invented by traditionalist elites to maintain their control over the state machinery

[†] Professor, Hirao School of Management, Konan University, Hyogo, Japan; Visiting Scholar, Waseda University Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies (WIAPS). 甲南大学マネジメント創造学部 教授；早稲田大学アジア太平洋研究センター員（「開発と人権」研究部会メンバー）

[†2] Associate Professor, Department of Research & Consultancy, Royal Institute of Management (RIM), Thimphu, Bhutan.

amid challenges posed by modernizers (Munro 2016).

These assertions—although they technically help broaden the scope of the debate on GNH—are flawed in that they reduce the philosophy to being nothing more than a means for the country's elites to perpetuate the status quo. Consequently, the criticism diverts attention from the multiplicity of realities apart from the prevalent social context that the critics speak of. This drawback manifests itself in the book entitled *Development Challenges in Bhutan: Perspectives on Inequality and Gross National Happiness* (Schmidt 2017). It contains a compilation of papers which assess the trajectory of GNH's implementation in relation to the country's democratization; economic development; and policies for priority areas such as cultural conservation, social services, and information and communications technology (ICT) promotion.

This article takes up three chapters of the book to gain insight on how they characterize the country's social context in which GNH and its related initiatives are implemented as such a solid, proven, and entrenched order as to legitimatize the status quo. It seeks to criticize this stance with recourse to the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) put forth by Bruno Latour, one of the world's leading intellectuals who calls on social analysts "to observe better, with a finer resolution" (De Vries 2016, vii). As noted in a review article, the book is "Western-judgmental" and "does not even try to understand Bhutan better": "GNH is simply and statically presented as an "anti-development ethos (the Middle Path)" (p. 4) and more of an elite power-grab" (Drechsler 2020, 414–5).

According to the ANT, social analysts tend to draw on "the same tiny repertoire of already-recognized forces" accepted in their inner circles (Latour 2005, 249). Furthermore, they fabricate a particularistic social context that allegedly holds society together through a "convenient shorthand" method (Latour 2005, 11). They confine actors to the role of informants offering cases that fit well with ostensibly disinterested, ultra-lucid gazes of social analysts, and limit in advance the shape, size, and combination of networks formed by the actors (Latour 2005, 11).

In this manner, the ANT helps shed light on the drawbacks of *Development Challenges in Bhutan*, essentializing the negativity surrounding the trajectories of the country's development. This article starts with a brief introduction to the ANT, followed by an overview of the aforementioned three chapters. It then elucidates how the authors' one-sided interpretations of the country's social context "fix a world on paper" (Latour 2005, 127). It concludes by emphasizing the need for an account that is "livelier, more talkative, active, pluralistic, and more mediated" (Latour 2005, 115).

2. Theoretical Framework: The Actor-Network Theory (ANT)

As stated above, Latour claims that social analysts generally disregard the extensive preparation required to analyze social context and adopt a "convenient shorthand" method instead. They are most likely to relegate social context to a "matter of fact" (Latour 2005, 114) and ignore the actors' "passionate objections that resist social explanations" on the basis that actors occupy a "lowly status" (Latour 2005, 101).

Against this background, Latour argues for "reassembling the social," as per the title of his book (Latour 2005). The ANT regards an actor-network, not as "a thing out there," but as "a tool to help describe something" (Latour 2005, 131). It meticulously traces social context and its underlying actor-networks, with particular attention paid to how they are able "to register differences, to absorb multiplicity, to be remade for each new case at hand" (Latour 2005, 121).

2.1 Multiplicity surrounding social context: the need to "reassemble the social"

It follows from the above that social analysts should leave open "the possibility for failure ... because it's the only way to maintain the quality of the scientific grasp" (Latour 2005, 251). They must develop an alternative habit of thinking that stirs in them a troubling and exhilarating feeling that things could be different or that they could even fail (Latour 2005, 89). The social is not a stable aggregate, given the following sources of uncertainties that bring about the multiplicity of actor-networks.

First, myriad forms of actor-networks exist in that "groupings have constantly to be made, or remade, and during this creation or recreation the group-makers leave behind many traces that can be used as data" (Latour 2005, 34). This goes against the prevailing tendency among social analysts who often discuss ethnicity, class, or life trajectories as given out there, to favor a certain grouping while dismissing others as being imaginary, illusory, or meaningless (Latour 2005, 28).

Second, actor-networks have to be "demonstrated each time anew" and "can never be simply postulated" (Latour 2005, 53). Due to their fluid, transient, and multidimensional nature, "in each course of action a great variety of agents seem to barge in and displace the original goals" (Latour 2005, 22). Actor-networks should be treated as "a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled" (Latour 2005, 44).

Finally, social analysts are advised to make it a point to examine their own default positions (Latour 2005, 97). Actors do "translate" the conventional meanings scholars attach to the social to modify, distort, or nullify them; "surprising aliens" may pop up in defiance of a linear cause-and-effect relation (Latour 2005, 58–9). Actors do not faithfully "transport" the interpretations made by scholars in a predetermined, routine manner (Latour 2005, 39, 108). It is accordingly vital to give actors the leverage "to unfold their own differing cosmos, no matter how counter-intuitive they appear" (Latour 2005, 23).

Latour also highlights the need to heed the non-social or non-human entities that come into play. This is on the understanding that "[a]s soon as some freedom of movement is granted back to non-humans, the range of agents able to participate in the course of action extends prodigiously" (Latour 2005, 76–7). The importance of bringing non-human objects into the analysis of actor-networks is analogous to slowing down a car with or without a speed bump, or running a company with or without bookkeeping (Latour 2005, 71).

2.2 "Localizing the global" and "connecting sites": beyond the macro-micro divide

In view of the fluid and multidimensional nature of actor-networks, Latour warns against the temptation to delineate social context as a solid and proven order, within which local interactions are perceived to be nested (Latour 2005, 167). Both the macro context and micro local interactions should be situated next to each other, to do away with the macro-micro divide (Latour 2005, 175–83). The broader context is neither above nor below local interactions, but can stand only when forged, assembled, or maintained through various interactions; it never acts as a complete bird's-eye view of the world (Latour 2005, 184).

Consequently, Latour proposes the following two-pronged steps: The first one is "localizing the global" to realize how the broader context ("the global") serves as another connection that either feeds local interactions or feeds off of them (Latour 2005, 177). The other step is associated with "connecting sites" in that interactions are "interfered with by heterogeneous entities that don't have the same local presence, don't come from the same time, are not visible at once, and don't press upon them with the same weight" (Latour 2005, 202). Local interactions are imbued with elements that emerge from some other time, place, or agency.

Latour expounds on this by providing an example about a professor from a prestigious university who gives a lecture in an old amphitheater and is surrounded by well-ordered tiers of attentive students (Latour 2005, 194–6). The lecture is made possible through a variety of indirect but traceable connections, including those with the amphitheater built in the ancient period, among others (pointing to the need for "connecting sites"). In ancient times, cities vied for preeminence by glamorizing their own theaters in scale and ornamentation. This wider context of the ancient period is neither above nor below the students' conduct in the lecture (implying the importance of "localizing the global"). The theater may enable the students to hear a pin drop and thus prevent them from chatting with each other. At the same time, the solemn building may adversely cause the students to be drowsy.

While the conventional scholarly practice of leaping to the global or the social context should be abandoned, this does not imply that social analysts must solely focus on supposedly "real" or concrete local interactions because they are as much of an abstraction as the social context (Latour 2005, 166). Otherwise, social analysts could not possibly address themselves to the task of "localizing the global" or "connecting sites" (Latour 2005, 220). It is imperative for them to "lay continuous connections leading from one local interaction to other places, times, and agencies through which a local site is made to do something" (Latour 2005, 172).

Bruno Latour is an "empirical philosopher," according to a book that offers an overview of his work, which revolves around the idea that reality is not a territory waiting to be mapped under the prerogative of scholars (De Vries 2016, 10–1). Latour thus offers a way to "allow us to renew, from top to bottom, the very scene of empiricism" so that a more realistic perspective can emerge (Latour 2005, 114).

3. Fixating Bhutan's Social Context: the Case of *Development Challenges in Bhutan*

This section gives an overview of the three chapters of *Development Challenges in Bhutan*, before analyzing their pitfalls with recourse to the ANT in the following sections.

The three chapters consist of the introductory paper (Schmidt 2017b), a chapter that discusses the links between GNH and inequalities (Bothe 2017), and one on Bhutan's transition from monarchy to democracy (Miyamoto 2017). They were specifically chosen because they sum up the main idea of the book; they describe the Bhutanese social context as being "authoritarian," "nationalistic," and "religiopolitical" in a negative sense.

The chapters claim that the social context is "authoritarian" because order and stability are unduly prioritized over individual freedom; it is "nationalistic" because intolerance and bigotry are advanced in the name of protecting established traditions; and it is "religiopolitical" because Buddhism is made to become the overarching principle over all public matters, thus nullifying the public-private divide and jeopardizing freedom of thought and conscience.

3.1 "Development challenges in Bhutan" (J.D. Schmidt)

The introductory essay (Schmidt 2017b) begins by reiterating that Bhutan has garnered international praise unlike its South Asian neighbors that are often beset with poverty and political instability. Schmidt also stresses the need for a "more nuanced and contradictory" view of the country's politico-economic and politico-cultural evolution (pp. 1–2).

Schmidt goes on to make a number of statements concerning Bhutan's evolution. First, GNH is widely hailed as a pioneering initiative in tune with the present-day realization that the endless pursuit of economic growth has taken its toll on the environment as well as the wellbeing of humanity. However, it is actually an "ideological instrument" utilized by those in power to suppress minorities (pp. 2–4). It particularly serves as a vehicle to impose a common sense of identity on various linguistic and ethnic groups, in the guise of preserving the country's unique Mahayana Buddhism-based culture. Most notably, according to Schmidt, this brought about "the denial of Bhutanese citizenship and the subsequent exodus" of southern dwellers from the late 1980s until the early 1990s (p. 2).

Second, Bhutan is also known for having peacefully transitioned to the present "democratic constitutional monarchy" through the promulgation of its constitution in 2008. However, this process was left unfinished, thus entrenching the governing elites' command over the direction of the country, and stifling opposing points of view regarding the country's future (pp. 3–4). Political parties have to refrain from upholding a vision that could potentially divide people along ethnic, religious, and regional lines. Moreover, the King continues to wield decision-making power in every important matter relating to economic, social, cultural, defense, and foreign policy.

Bhutan's education system—which is made accessible to the entire population—is the third salient feature that won Bhutan international acclaim. This system, however, is yet another "ideological instrument" to instill awareness of the nation's cultural values, and enhance national identity in the

name of advocating GNH (pp. 6–8). Schmidt attributes this to the prevalent sense of crisis among Bhutanese elites who fear that the country's unique culture could be swamped by external influences that come with the increasing transborder interactions in the era of globalization.

The GNH philosophy therefore lapses into "an anti-developmental ethos (the Middle Path)" (p. 4) wherein culture, environment, and history take undue precedence over economic progress. The "anti-developmental" policy of imbuing particular cultural values and ideals has hampered the government's efforts to overcome key developmental constraints, which include the country's narrow tax base, unstable employment, miniscule private sector, and inadequate physical infrastructure (pp. 8–10).

Underlying this predicament surrounding the country's development is its precarious geopolitical location between China and India, which causes national security concerns for Bhutanese elites (pp. 4–6). This "anti-developmental" stance emanates from their fear that the country is on the verge of being seized by its two populous neighbors, which have each merged Tibet and Sikkim into their respective territories. A paternalistic approach to nation-building has therefore come to the fore—prioritizing the collective identity over individual citizens' liberty, and encouraging loyalty, allegiance, and devotion to the status quo.

3.2 "Gross National Happiness and inequality" (W. Bothe)

Bothe (2017) likewise alleges a parallelism between "Gross National Happiness and inequality," as the title of the chapter suggests. Among the goals of GNH is to achieve balanced and equitable development, which is essentially a façade for the government's de facto topmost priority of perpetuating the monarchy-led, Buddhism-based state, and preserving cultural homogeneity and national cohesion (pp. 52–6). Regrettably, GNH has not proven to be instrumental in ameliorating the material, symbolic, and gender inequalities plaguing the country.

First, despite Bhutan's reported accomplishment of one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of halving the incidence of poverty between 2000 and 2012, existing statistics and reports attest to various lingering material inequalities along ethnic and regional lines, in addition to urban-rural income disparity (pp. 56–60). Regional inequalities reflect the power asymmetries among different ethnic groups. Moreover, the country's Gini index remains as one of the highest in the world because of the relative economic stagnation in outlying areas and the widening urban-rural gap.

Second, "the elaborate symbolism that blends Buddhism and the monarchical system" (p. 61) remains deeply entrenched even after Bhutan's transition to the present "democratic constitutional monarchy" in 2008 (pp. 61–3). The constitution positions the King as the upholder of both the religious and political values of peace and prosperity. "The mythology surrounding the monarchy rubs off on the officials who serve the state apparatus" (p. 62), thereby influencing them to deviate from democracy. The public is also required to pay due respect to dignitaries in accordance with the state-stipulated codes on proper decorum.

Third, gender disparity also persists in politics, contrary to the tendency of democratization to give rise to an increase in female representation in parliamentary and local elective positions (pp. 63–5). Bhutan's religious and cultural traditions also subjugate women who are assigned less important roles in Buddhist ceremonies and services. Moreover, gender disparity is evident in daily social settings through the association of women's formal dress with the pre-Buddhist era, whereas the male attire is linked with religion and politics.

3.3 "Being apolitical and being religious" (M. Miyamoto)

According to Miyamoto (2017), despite the implementation of the present "democratic constitutional monarchy," the King has de facto remained at the helm of the Bhutanese state even after supposedly handing political power over to the executive (pp. 101–4). This is illustrated through his continued influence over the state machinery. He appoints *Dzongdas* (the governors of the country's 20 districts) who stand above party politics to ensure peace and order as agents of the King. Moreover, he remains as the supreme commander of the armed forces, which poses yet another obstacle to democratization.

Along with these measures to grant supreme power to the King is the present system's hidden agenda of "maintain[ing] the society as an apolitical entity" (p. 111). The "democratic constitutional monarchy" has thereby been designed to restrict the political arena to a narrow circle of university graduates, majority of whom are urban-based, and some of whom work as civil servants (pp. 98–9). Only those with a formal university degree can contest the newly formed bicameral legislature. This measure is aimed at "creating different divisions in society" (p. 112), or, as implied in Miyamoto's essay, is tantamount to a strategy of dividing and ruling.

This restrictive electoral eligibility has caused tension between the parliamentarians and experienced local leaders who are barred from running for national-level elections (p. 99). This arrangement has reduced the political importance of the local communities' ongoing hierarchical structures. In addition, religious personalities, including Buddhist monks and nuns, are deprived of voting rights as well (pp. 104–8). Even lay monks—who plough land, graze cattle, pay government taxes, and are integral members of local communities—are denied the chance to cast their ballots to honor the separation of religion and politics.

Another measure to "maintain the society as an apolitical entity" is the multi-party system, which is also highly restricting (pp. 100–1). It has been introduced to only one of the two legislative wings, that is, the National Assembly (NA). Political parties are not allowed to partake in the elections for the National Council (NC) or for *Gewogs* ("local counties", which number 205 in Bhutan). Moreover, political parties are prohibited from organizing themselves along ethnic, religious, and regional lines, while the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) is designated as the foremost authority in carrying out surveillance of this electoral rule (pp. 108–9). During elections, the ECB strictly oversees the parties' and candidates' conduct. Prior to elections, it relentlessly turns away any applications to estab-

lish a party that it deems detrimental to the national unity and the social fabric.

4. Reassembling the Bhutanese Social Context (Part I), in View of Multiple Actor-Networks

The three authors describe the social context in which GNH and its related initiatives are promoted as being "authoritarian," "nationalistic," and "religiopolitical." While they mean this as a form of criticism, their analyses by no means must be seen as a "matter of fact." Bhutanese policy elites form different groupings for each case at hand. Their networks are not unidimensional but, in Latour's words, are "nodes, knots, and conglomerates" that cause "surprising aliens" to pop up. Care should therefore be taken to heed the multiplicity of elites' networks, which eludes the three authors' analyses.

4.1 "Development challenges in Bhutan" (J.D. Schmidt)

According to Schmidt, GNH has been promoted under the country's "anti-developmental" ethos in a manner that prioritizes culture and environment over economic progress. This claim is misdirected because it points to the overbearing presence of a network of policy elites who are primarily concerned with the promotion of cultural homogeneity and national cohesion. On the contrary, another network of elites who prioritize economic progress as much as culture and environment certainly exists. This is evidenced by the Economic Development Policy adopted in 2010 and updated in 2016 to "ensure that (economic) growth takes place in consonance with the principles of GNH (stressing the preservation of culture and environment)" (Ministry of Economic Affairs 2016, 6, parentheses added).

Bhutan 2020: A Vision for Peace, *Prosperity and Happiness*, the first policy document articulating GNH as the country's development strategy, asserts that "the concept…does not reject economic growth" (Planning Commission 1999, 11). The official stance of the government—that the pursuit of material wellbeing is integral to GNH—has thus far been maintained.

Moreover, Schmidt erroneously attributes the country's "anti-developmental" ethos to the Buddhist notion of the "Middle Path." On the contrary, the said notion declares that the ultimate truth revolves around the non-duality of reality (Givel 2015, 21). Accordingly, those who seek the ultimate truth must work toward a "balancing of material, emotional, and spiritual needs" (Givel 2015, 24–5). Embedded in Bhutanese society is the Buddhist view of interdependence that downplays the dominant either/or worldview (Schroeder and Schroeder 2014). Schmidt holds the latter view and therefore mistakenly distinguishes GNH from the pursuit of economic growth.

Schmidt is immersed in linear causalities that relate GNH with an "anti-developmental" ethos and the latter with Buddhism. This also attests to Schmidt's anthropocentric stance taking light of a non-human entity, which, in this case, is Buddhism. Even if policy elites were as uniformly ill-intentioned as assumed by Schmidt, they would not accomplish their objective because Buddhism, which preaches the need to avoid resorting to extremes, prevents them from promoting an "anti-developmental" ethos.

Schmidt's essay fails to consider the holistic nature of GNH that encompasses the pursuit of material

as well as nonmaterial wellbeing, allowing policy elites to form numerous types of networks. This crucial mistake should be avoided by taking into consideration Buddhism's undogmatic orientation, which serves as the GNH's backbone. Buddhism goes against a single-minded approach, which essentially makes it the antithesis of "anti-development."

4.2 "Gross National Happiness and inequality" (W. Bothe)

On the same note, Bothe claims that the country's "anti-developmental" ethos, embedded in GNH, prevents policy elites from working to redress regional and gender inequalities. Although the country has been facing continuous challenges in this respect, the author should not ignore Latour's dictum: "all actors do something and don't just sit there" (Latour 2005, 127–8). The country's recent five-year plans (FYPs) have been making strides toward addressing equity concerns, owing to various networks of committed policy elites.

During the Tenth FYP (2008–13), the National Plan of Action for Gender was drafted for the first time, whereas during the Eleventh FYP (2013–18), gender equality was included among the National Key Result Areas, which outlined 16 important goals to achieve within the FYP period. An added emphasis was placed on balanced and equitable development in the Eleventh FYP, which declared "self-reliance and inclusive green socio-economic development" as one of its major objectives. This led to the implementation of the Priority Sector Lending program, which provides cottage and small industries—especially agricultural and rural-based enterprises—with financial access. In the ensuing Twelfth FYP (2018-23), gender equality continues to be one of the National Key Result Areas, while an additional goal of reducing poverty and inequality is included to tackle a total of 18 Areas.

Bothe does acknowledge that such "a series of reforms" has been made, but remains adamant that "these efforts do not rhyme easily with the country's emphasis on promoting and standardizing tradition in a reinvented image of tantric Buddhism" (p. 66). Furthermore, the author states that "[t]his raises the question whether a democratic culture can take root in such a traditionalized and hierarchical setting" (p. 66).

Underlying this assertion is the essentialized notion of culture that overemphasizes social cohesion and unity. It is not shared among those who promote GNH: they generally harbor a more dynamic view of culture as a site of contestation. As noted in a government report on GNH, presented to the UN, "[w]hile nurturing and safeguarding distinctive cultural forms, discarding harmful cultural practices contrary to global ethics is a part of this social change" (New Development Paradigm Steering Committee and Secretariat 2012, 23).

This is in line with the Buddhist teaching which defines the sense of self as "a perpetually evolving set of probabilities," contrary to the Western view that equates the self with "a persistent, self-coherent, discrete substance" (Schroeder and Schroeder 2014, 3526). Bothe embraces the latter view, which resonates with the above-mentioned essentialized notion of culture.

At the time of writing (December 2019), two out of the four Constitutional Bodies (the Royal Audit

Authority, the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Royal Civil Service Commission, and the ECB) have female chairpersons. This is a testament to the efforts being made by Bhutanese leaders to rectify gender disparities. Chairpersons are appointed by the King from a list of candidates recommended by the Prime Minister, the Chief Justice, the Speaker of the Parliament, the Chairperson of the NC, and the Opposition Leader.

Moreover, the results of the periodic Bhutan GNH surveys are disaggregated to verify regional, gender, and other gaps. The 2010 and 2015 surveys highlighted existing urban-rural and gender disparities (Centre for Bhutan Studies and GNH Research 2015). On account of these survey results, the country's development strategies have been subjected to ceaseless reviews and revisions that are in line with Buddhism preaching "a perpetually evolving set of probabilities."

Contrary to Bothe's assertion, "these efforts *do* rhyme with the country's emphasis on promoting and standardizing tradition in a reinvented image of tantric Buddhism." The country's "traditionalized and hierarchical setting" must not be downplayed in a wholesale way.

4.3 "Being apolitical and being religious" (M. Miyamoto)

Miyamoto criticizes the democratic constitutional monarchy, claiming that it fails to comply with the "global" standard of polyarchy (p. 111). In the words of the original proponent of polyarchy, "the rights to engage fully in political life must be extended, with very few if any exceptions, to the entire population of adults" (Dahl 1998, 90). According to Miyamoto, Bhutan's democratic constitutional monarchy is tantamount to a plot to "maintain the society as an apolitical entity," contravening the "global" standard.

In this respect, an alternative interpretation can be made as follows. While it may be plausible to identify a group of policy elites who devote themselves to avoiding the politicization of the status quo, there are also those who are wary of the possible proliferation of divisive, partisan party politics. Accordingly, in Bhutan "[t]he public value placed on stability was built into the political rules for the democracy" (Turner et al. 2011, 198). This is against the backdrop of the worldwide rise of post-democracy (Crouch 2004). In "established" democracies, a multi-party system is increasingly perceived as being incapable of catering to public preference or collective interest. Instead, multi-party democracies lapse into an affair of closed elites (e.g., corporate executives, politicians, and functionaries), thus causing the electorate to become disillusioned with and apathetic toward politics.

In Bhutan, *Gewog*-level representatives are elected by secret ballot, but they must not belong to any political party. Miyamoto believes that this arrangement, in accordance with the policy elites' intention to advance a strategy of dividing and ruling, "restrains people from belonging to multiple social categories or entities and drives them into one exclusive attribute or identity" (p. 111). Alternatively, this arrangement of assigning *Gewog*-level representatives "one exclusive identity" can be regarded as a judicious move to avoid freeing up space for political parties to shift local politics away from public interest. The proximity of local representatives to their electorates helps bring the former to account

and keep democracy alive (Dorji 2018, 25). This works best when *Gewog*-level politics are exempt from multi-party politics.

In addition, this chapter is also one-dimensional in that it assumes that restricting the national-level political arena to university graduates serves to "maintain the society as an apolitical entity" and thus to augment the legitimacy of the monarchy. On the contrary, the rule can politicize the status quo in view of the recent trend; "[c]ultural cohesiveness forged by values drawn from Buddhism and indigenous traditions is subject to trial" (Ura 2014, 49).

Bhutanese policy elites are "now barely conversant in written *dzongkha* (the national language) and *choskay* (classical Tibetan used for all written communication before *Dzongkha* was introduced in the twentieth century) and depend largely on English," and resultantly their ways of thinking that draw on "educational backgrounds associated with social and physical sciences" matter more in their day-to-day businesses (Ura 2014, 49, parentheses added). The liberal-democratic ideal is among various exogenous scientific ideas that may be embraced by Bhutanese educated elites; it is "the dominant form of political force in the developed world, and increasingly in the developing world" (Heywood, 2017, 39). Moreover, according to the liberal-democratic conviction, monarchical rule should recede with the advent of democracy, as noted by Bothe (p. 62).

The rule granting national-level electoral eligibility solely to university graduates can therefore be a double-edged sword, which does not necessarily serve to consolidate the democratic constitutional monarchy. In this regard, just like Schmidt and Bothe, who fail to grasp Buddhism's implications on GNH promotion, Miyamoto disregards the possibility of another non-human entity coming into play, that is, the liberal-democratic ideal which may potentially permeate segments of the educated class.

5. Reassembling the Bhutanese Social Context (Part II), by Way of "Localizing the Global" and "Connecting Sites"

The three authors also face the related pitfall of seeing local interactions as firmly nested within the allegedly solid social context: they believe that the latter provides a comprehensive bird's-eye view of what takes place within the Bhutanese society. On the contrary, the macro context and micro interactions should be situated next to each other by way of "localizing the global" and "connecting sites" to avoid conjuring the macro-micro divide. In this way, a more realistic picture is to emerge, which takes the connections and interactions across various societies—including the Bhutanese society—into account.

5.1 "Being apolitical and being religious" (M. Miyamoto)

To continue reviewing Miyamoto's paper, it conceals the interference of the global rise of post-democracy with the local decision to establish the democratic constitutional monarchy. The system, which, in Miyamoto's words, intends to "maintain the society as an apolitical entity," should be positioned next to the global phenomenon of post-democracy. The democratic constitutional monarchy

would then take on a different meaning as a system of checks and balances aimed at regulating the ruling party's arbitrary use of governmental power.

The members of the NC are banned from being part of any political party. This helps the NC act as a vigilant house of review that questions the constitutionality of the decisions of the NA led by the ruling party, a point ignored by Miyamoto. Just like *Gewog*-level representatives, the NC members are expected to prevent the proliferation of partisan party politics. Moreover, the exclusion of religious personalities from the political scene is meant to accord them the role of safeguarding the moral fabric of society and mitigating divisive forces that could potentially arise due to the advent of party politics.

Miyamoto's problematization of the Bhutanese polity for its failure to comply with the "global" standard of polyarchy attests to the author's hierarchical outlook founded on the unwarranted macro-micro divide. The "global" standard is neither above nor below the local polity: they should both be placed on a level playing field. Latour's proposed two-pronged steps for "localizing the global" and "connecting sites" must instead be adopted to ascertain the linkage between the design of the democratic constitutional monarchy and the related but invisible phenomenon of post-democracy. This would enable Miyamoto to avoid being "Western-judgemental" in the words of Drechesler (2020, 414), and to realize that the Bhutanese local policy is not necessarily at a lower stage of an evolutionary progression toward the "global" standard of polyarchy.

5.2 "Gross National Happiness and inequality" (W. Bothe)

Bothe likewise averts from "localizing the global" and "connecting sites," and instead claims that "the idea of Bhutan as a traditional Buddhist nation continues to impede equality" (p. 66). However, material inequality within the country cannot be relegated as an internal matter, given the consensus among scholars that inequality within countries has a tendency to grow alongside economic globalization (Chirico 2014, 108). Contrary to Bothe's assertion, the issue must therefore be assessed with reference to the worldwide phenomena of deepening international trade and investment ties. Under the sway of neoliberalism, the free market ideology has been thriving around the globe, hailing the deregulation of governmental controls—which include trade and capital flow barriers between countries—as a means to promote economic growth and proliferate material prosperity.

"Bhutan is not immune from pressures that have led other states to see economic growth as a core political imperative, including pressures to raise material living standards and create employment within a context of globalized capitalism and consumer culture" (Hayden 2015, 162). Accordingly, Bhutanese government deregulated control of transborder transactions by enforcing the Foreign Direct Investment Policy in 2010. In the same year, the Economic Development Policy was adopted to affirm governmental commitment to nurturing the private sector, which brings in new technologies and innovations and thus serves as "the engine of economic growth" (Ministry of Economic Affairs 2016, 5).

These growth-oriented measures should not be played down a priori because they can assist in

relieving people of material scarcity. At the same time, their possible contribution to the concentration of material wealth among the few with means to amass it must also be assessed. Under the worldwide sway of neoliberalism, "Bhutan has not been immune to capitalism, resulting in increased materialism and the emergences of a status-conscious consumer class with disposable income" (Verma 2017, 486).

Moreover, as opposed to Bothe's assertion, the topical issue is not that "the idea of Bhutan as a traditional Buddhist nation continues to impede equality," but whether a traditional Buddhism-based sufficiency view contains the increased individualistic profit motives and resultant material inequalities. Bhutanese policy elites generally embody a Buddhist sensibility whereby wellbeing is believed to be promoted when both wants and self-restraint are brought together in a harmonious arrangement (McDonald 2009, 615). While this gives rise to "a sufficiency-based critique of consumerism and endless growth" among policy elites, "this "strong GNH" formulation increasingly contends with a "weaker GNH" that is more in line with contemporary pressures for growth and greater consumption" (Hayden 2015, 161).

Bothe's argument on symbolic hierarchy is also misguided in that it criticizes the democratic constitutional monarchy for deviating from the following "global" standard; "the divine monarch would diminish in the course of the constitutional transition" (p. 62). This statement implies that Bhutan is yet to embrace the "global" trend toward a "direct-access society" that is not mediated by intermediaries such as a particular leader or religion, to draw on the expressions of Charles Taylor (2004, 157).

In this respect, Bothe fails to grasp the up-to-date information on political development; recent studies of modern global history illustrate that monarchies, often grounded on sacral metaphysics, have played a central role in the development of modern nation states, in a number of cases (Maissen et al. 2017). In addition, multiple paths to a direct-access society have existed even in the West, and "it should be all the more obvious how much greater are the differences among the major civilizations" (Taylor 2004, 196). Bhutan is part of the Tantric Buddhism civilization.

Contrary to Bothe's assertion, "the divine monarch *need not* diminish in the course of the constitutional transition." In Bhutan, the move toward a direct-access society has been propelled by both the monarchy and religion. According to Buddhism, monarchy can be a proper mode of political organization when the king promulgates morality in society as a religious leader (Kinga 2009, 17–9; Drechsler 2020, 417).

The King of Bhutan has historically served as an agent of building a direct-access society for the benefit of the population. The establishment of hereditary monarchy in 1907 marked the end of incessant feuds over succession and civil wars that had long afflicted the country: it has laid the foundation for the country's peace and social order. The serf system was also subsequently abolished to allow a majority of people to own agricultural land. In addition, numerous other political reforms were initiated under the hereditary monarchy, culminating in the transition toward the democratic constitutional monarchy in 2008.

Bothe criticizes the King for having remained at the helm of the Bhutanese state. It is implied in

Bothe's chapter, as in Miyamoto's, that this arrangement infringes on the "global" standard of polyarchy. However, the standard can be a "self-subverting doctrine" in that it does not in itself nurture an ethos of harmony and tolerance, but instead can counteract associative bonds among the general public (Walzer 2004, 153–4). This is especially apparent in the present era of post-democracy when political power is prone to be concentrated in the hands of the privileged few, thus creating a schism between the government and its subjects. In view of this, the Bhutanese polity entrusts the King with the important role of being the country's "safety net" against divisive forces that can potentially arise in the advent of multi-party democracy (Dorji 2010, 148).

Bothe's assertion is beset by a hierarchical worldview that separates the "global" move toward a direct-access society from the "traditional" local situation; the latter is thought to be in need of being brought into the light of the former. However, when the local decision to rest on the authorities of the monarchy and Buddhism is set against the global phenomenon of post-democracy, it becomes apparent that "the idea of Bhutan as a traditional Buddhist nation *works to promote* equality," contrary to Bothe's assertion. "Localizing the global" and "connecting sites" in this manner elucidates that Bhutan can serve as a prototype of how a country moves toward being a direct-access society.

5.3 "Development challenges in Bhutan" (J.D. Schmidt)

Schmidt, on the other hand, seemingly seeks to "lay continuous connections" with other places and times through which Bhutan's elites are "made to do something," in line with Latour's dictum. The country's geopolitical location between India and China is referred to in Schmidt's chapter. Bhutan's two neighbors have annexed Sikkim and Tibet. These former Buddhist kingdoms, together with Nepal, have been "perceived as worst-case scenarios where Buddhism, the monarchy, and feudal elite's power grab had been destroyed" (p. 5). This supports what Schmidt considers as unwarranted fears among Bhutan's elites about their hold on power as well as the country's sovereignty.

According to Schmidt, Bhutanese elites chose a policy compelling different linguistic and ethnic groups to harbor a common sense of identity because they deemed it necessary for the country to remain as a sovereign nation state. This policy notably resulted in "the denial of Bhutanese citizenship and the subsequent exodus" of Nepali-speaking southern dwellers from the late 1980s until the early 1990s (p. 2). "The Bhutanese Nepalese were perceived by Thimphu as having created havoc, anarchy, and "terror," and this reinforced the Drukpa (Bhutanese) elite's fear of civil war (breaking out) in Bhutan and the Himalaya region" (p. 5, parentheses added).

While Schmidt ostensibly attempts to study Bhutan's refugee problem in relation to its macro geopolitical concern, the link between the two should be examined from a broader angle. Schmidt cannot entirely attribute the elites' apprehensions to these "external events" (p. 4) that took place in Sikkim, Tibet, and Nepal. Political activism among migrant Nepalis residing in India, which historically spilled over to the Bhutanese territory, should also be taken into account.

This activism can be traced back to the mass migration of Nepalis to north-eastern British India in

the nineteenth century. Those migrant Nepalis were concerned that they would be discriminated against and not be recognized as a distinct group living in Indian territory (Hutt 2001, 194). From as early as in the 1920s, "[t]he British probably feared that it might be only a matter of time before similar activism spread to (southern) Bhutan" adjoining British India (Hutt 2001, 114, parenthesis added). Their fears were realized when an anti-establishment group called the Bhutanese State Congress was formed in the 1950s by well-educated Bhutanese Nepalis who had migrated to India at the time of its independence (Hutt 2001, 121–2). The group demanded political reforms of the Bhutanese state, and staged street demonstrations in a border town on the side of the country.

One of the most violent campaigns was waged inside India, by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) from 1986 to 1988 which demanded the creation of a separate nation state called "Gorkhaland" within the State of West Bengal. This incident not only served as an impetus to the refugee crisis that started in Bhutan in the late 1980s. The GNLF and its affiliate organizations also alleged their support to those who spearheaded demonstrations in southern Bhutan (Ura 2001, 133). The two-and-a-half-year conflict in West Bengal had resulted in severe casualties because of the clashes between the GNLF and the police, as well as those with the Communists Party of India (Marxist) which was supported by Nepali tea garden workers opposing the GNLF's demand for statehood (Hutt 2001, 195).

Disregarding the significance of the historical transborder political activism, Schmidt depicts Bhutanese elites as being overly fearful that the country may be on the path of extinction. This is evident in his relegation of the country's geopolitical position to mere "external events" (p. 4). This confirms Schmidt's outdated notion of borders marking a clear distinction between the domestic and the foreign, in defiance of networks of people spanning the country's borders.

In this sense, Schmidt does not fully "lay continuous connections" with other places and times. As a result, the historical transborder political activism fails to enter the picture. Latour's two-pronged strategy of "localizing the global" and "connecting sites" is necessary to ascertain how the political activism that "did not come from the same time and was not visible at once" interfered with the country's refugee problem.

6. Conclusion

The book *Development Challenges in Bhutan* negatively describes the social context in which GNH and its related initiatives are promoted as being "authoritarian," "nationalistic," and "religiopolitical" in nature. However, a textbook on political ideologies notes that "authoritarianism" must be "distinguished from totalitarianism" because the former is "exercised over a population with or without its consent" (Heywood 2017, 74). Similarly, "nationalism" should neither be regarded as necessarily oppressive nor regressive. This is because it can take the form of "liberal nationalism" which calls for the establishment of an equitable world composed of sovereign nation-states; and propounds international peace and cooperation (Heywood 2017, 177–80). Moreover, a political system founded on reli-

gious principles can preserve the moral fabric of society (Heywood 2017, 301). In this sense, a "religiopolitical" polity is not inevitably bound to encroach on individual liberty or equity concerns, but can also pave the way for a smooth and healthy functioning of government.

Accordingly, due regard must be given to the following aspects of the country's social context. The context is "authoritarian" in the sense that it is founded on the belief in the wisdom of Buddhism-based mores, which renounce the egoistic desire of winning over others, and thus inhibit "authoritarianism" from being "exercised over the population without its consent." Underlying GNH is the "nationalistic" desire to promote regional peace and stability and protect the country's sovereignty, which is very much in line with "liberal nationalism." The country's "religiopolitical" strategy is to position Buddhism as an accumulation of time-honored wisdom and to capitalize on it as the basis of its pursuit of good governance.

Attention should therefore be paid to the multiplicity of realities existing outside of the ostensibly solid social context that, the three authors allege, dominates Bhutanese society. This is especially significant, given the undogmatic nature of Buddhism, the backbone of GNH, which downplays a single-minded approach. As mentioned above, Buddhism states that the ultimate truth revolves around the non-duality of reality in lieu of the dominant either/or worldview. This either/or outlook has a tendency to prompt academics to adopt a "convenient shorthand" method and disregard the extensive preparation required for adequate social analysis, as exemplified by the three authors; their chapters can be seen as "part of a backlash, if minor, against Bhutanese successes" especially those relating to GNH that "challenges mainstream theories left and right" (Drechsler 2020, 414). The mainstream either/or worldview must not be allowed to hamper a balanced, nuanced understanding of the country's "authoritarian," "nationalistic," and "religiopolitical" context.

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